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ABSTRACT

Personality is defined as the dynamic organization, within an individual, of the systems that determine his or her characteristic behavior or thought. The study of personality involves many aspects of human behavior. Four approaches used to study personality are presented in this document: (1) Social Learning theory; (2) Trait theory; (3) Phenomenological theory; and (4) Cognitive-Development theory. Some principles of these theories overlap, but basic concepts are distinguishable. Social Learning theory's basic tenet is that human behavior results from an organism's past learning as it has developed through interaction with the environment. Trait theory asserts that personality is more or less organized by persistent characteristics or dimensions of individual differences--within each individual there exist predispositions to respond to situations in a certain manner. Phenomenological theory stresses the cognitive acquisition of meaning from stimuli an individual is presented with in life's daily activities. Cognitive-Developmental theory traces development of personality from birth to adulthood as capacities and concerns and thought processes develop. Some theorists posit that all normal individuals pass through the same sequential periods. Major theorists and approaches to personality assessment are described for each approach. Contains 23 references. (JBJ)

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Running Head: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY

Toward an Understanding of Personality: An Overview of Four Approaches in Personality Psychology

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Toward an Understanding of Personality:

An Overview of Four Approaches in Personality Psychology

Introduction

Personality is defined as the dynamic organization within an individual of the systems that determine his or her characteristic behavior or thought. The study of personality involves many aspects of human behavior - almost everything a human being does or can do. The various approaches used in the study of personality have synthesized what we already know, stimulated further research, and, in turn, specified their own view of personality. Four of these approaches will be presented in this paper. They are the social-learning, trait, phenomenological, and cognitive approaches. Prior to any further reading, one should be aware that some of the principles of these theories overlap, however, their basic concepts are distinguishable. It should also be noted that the cognitive approach to the development of personality is, relative to the others, a more recently unfolding area of interest. For this reason, a discussion of the cognitive approach will be presented last, with special consideration given to its underlying principles.

The Social-Learning Approach

The first approach we shall discuss is social-learning theory. Contrary to the organismic schools-of-thought which emphasize human response to internal forces, social-learning

theory's basic tenet is that human behavior results from an organism's past learning as it has developed through interaction with the environment. Perhaps it is proper to introduce B.F. Skinner's principle of operant conditioning as laying the foundation for social learning theory. Skinner never developed an implicit theory of personality, however, his principles have facilitated the social-learning approach to how personality develops. Skinner held that the frequency of a response will increase after it has beenfollowed by a favorable outcome (Mischel, 1986). This simply means that an individual is most likely to behave in such a manner that results in a favorable outcome for him/herself, yet is least likely to behave in a way that will elicit an unfavorable result. This is called operant conditioning, and according to Skinner, much of our behavior involves acting upon the environment to generate consequences, thus resulting in the control of our behavior by its own consequences and ultimately, by the environment.

As previously mentioned, social-learning theory emphasizes the influence of the environment on the behavior of organisms. It has also been stated that Skinner never developed what purports to explain personality. In light of the principle of operant conditioning, however, one can safely argue that an environmentally dependent basis in personality does exist. Is it possible that Skinner's neglect of the concept of personality is due to his total rejection of another concept - free will? This

is doubtful, for Skinnerian theory holds that personality is in itself observable behavior, and vice-versa. To Skinner, our behavior is shaped entirely by the contingencies of the environment. In Beyond Freedom and Dignity, (1972), Skinner writes:

> In the scientific picture a person is a member of the species shaped by evolutionary contingencies of survival, displaying behavioral processes which bring him under the control of the environment in which he lives, and largely under the control of a social environment which he and millions of others like him have constructed and maintained during the evolution of a culture. The direction of the controlling relation is reversed: A person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him. (p. 211)

The above words illustrate Skinner's idea of how we, as human beings, develop our behavior patterns. Now we must ask ourselves, are behavior patterns the sole content of what we refer to as personality? Judging from Skinner's emphasis on observable behavior, it is safe to assume that he would answer this question with an unequivocal "yes".

Maintaining Skinner's emphasis on observable behavior has been a function of contemporary social-learning approach to personality; however, present day social-learning theorists, as Staub (1980) notes, "are not content with research in which rewards or punishments are assumed de facto to be rewards or

punishments" (p. 208). This implies that the personal evaluation of events by the individual experiencing them are taken into consideration. Social-learning theorists are currently attempting to assess concerns that individuals possess toward stimuli they might encounter. In other words, extrapolation of Skinnerian theory has taken place in social-learning theory. As one theorist (Klinger, 1975) points out, "an event can serve as an incentive or reinforcement only insofar as that event is a current concern for an individual - 'reinforcement' meaning an event that has the power to shape behavior" (p. 82). This idea of "current concern" - or, put simply, what matters to an individual - is one social-learning theorist's view of how cognition occurs. (Cognition, the process of knowing, will be discussed more fully in another section of this paper.)

Events that have the power to shape behavior can be exposed to humans through a process that Bandura and his associates (1961) call "modeling". These researchers exposed children to adults who behaved aggressively toward an air-filled, plastic "Bobo" doll. During this procedure, the adults would accompany their physical thrusts with verbal abuse directed toward the doll. Bandura then allowed the children to play with the doll, and through observation concluded that the children, in imitating the acts of the aggressive adult models, outwardly expressed both physical and verbal aggression toward the "Bobo" doll. According to Aronson (1984), this classic experiment suggests that seeing a

person behave aggressively serves as an impetus for children to engage in innovative aggressive behavior.

Some people are aggressive while others are not. Whether or not aggressive behavior is viewed as a socially-learned phenomenon, one can confidently place it within the realm of personality. Social-learning theorists have contributed immensely to the study of personality, however, they have not emphasized the organization of an individual's distinguishing character traits, attitudes, or habits. Indeed, social-learning theories argue that we are constantly learning from our environment and developing our personalities, in a sense, from what the environment dictates. To the social-learning theorists, environmental contingencies and the powerful influence they exert on behavior warrant the most attention in the research of personality development.

The Social-Learning Approach to Personality Development

The contribution of the social-learning approach to the analysis of personality takes its form in behavioral assessment. Behavioral observation is common to all psychological approaches, however, it is the use that is made of the data obtained that distinguishes between them. Behavioral assessment treats observed behavior as a sample, and the focus is on how this sample is affected by variations in the stimulus conditions. Rather than focusing on what underlying mental dynamics might be causing the behavior, behaviorists focus on the behavior itself.

One example of the methods in assessment is functional analysis, which is characterized by an external evaluation of the individual by the professional. Advocates of this technique argue that through careful observation of the behavior in question as it naturally occurs one can determine the specific conditions that maintain the behavior. After these conditions are determined, systematic changes are made in the conditions, or contingencies, of the environment until the problem behavior no longer occurs and is substituted by more satisfactory behaviors (Mischel, 1986). These behavioral methods of treatment have been criticized by the organismic theorists as being superficial. They contend that in changing only the observable behavior manifested by the individual, the clinician fails to treat the underlying problem. Social learning and behavior psychologists maintain that there is no underlying or internal mental conflict - that the behavior in and of itself is that which constitutes the problem.

The Trait Approach

Trait theory asserts that personality is more or less organized by persistent characteristics or dimensions of individual differences. According to Gordon Allport, traits are distinctive to each person, that serve to unify many different stimuli by leading the person to generate consistent responses to them (Mischel, 1986). In other words, Allport believed that within each individual there exist predispositions to respond to

situations in a certain manner. He called these predispositions "cardinal traits". Whereas social-learning theory points to the environment as the determinant of behavior, Allport's explanation of behavior differs from this belief significantly in that it recognizes inherited capabilities, past experiences, and the interactions between them. Indeed, Allport's conception of traits is that they operate in unique ways in each person, thus personality depends more upon the operation of these traits rather than the contingencies of the environment.

To Allport, the collection of traits possessed by any given individual comprises a "structure" that dictates behavior emitted by that individual. Hans J. Eysenck, while focusing much of his work on the relationships between just two traits, prefers to view this structure as a "dimension". The dimensions upon which Eysenck concentrated his studies are what he calls "introversion-extroversion" and "stability-instability", or neuroticism. According to Eysenck, introversion is characterized by tendencies to engage in thought and inhibit impulses. At the other extreme, Eysenck characterizes extraversion as a tendency to be highly sociable and self-expressive (Rathus, 1981). Neuroticism, as defined by Eysenck, is the tendency for emotional instability, hypothesized to reflect a highly reactive nervous system (Eysenck & Rachman, 1965). Recent research in migraine disorder has resulted in interesting correlations between Eysenck's introversion-extraversion construct and physiological measures.

As Welch, Nagel-Leiby, and D'Andrea in The Biological and Behavioral Basis of Migraine (1987) point out:

> Extraverts and high sensation seekers tend to be independent, impulsive, socially outgoing and show a preference for intense and complex stimuli. These individuals tend to be highly sensitive to pain...[and] are associated with high plasma levels of norepinephrine..., a neurotransmitter released during pain-threatening situations. Introverts and low sensation seekers tend to be dependent, anxious, socially-withdrawn and show a preference for simple, low intensity stimuli. These individuals tend to be insensitive to pain, but highly sensitive to ego-threatening situations [and] are associated with high epinephrine levels, a neurotransmitter released during ego-threatening situations. (p. 8)

The sensation-seeking construct mentioned above is a personality measure similar to Eysenck's introversion-extraversion dimension. Developed by Marvin Zuckerman (1971), he postulated that the "need for change, variety, and intensity would manifest itself in many aspects of behavior, including sensory, social, and thrill-seeking types of activity" (p. 45). Considering the above mentioned correlations between physiological measures and personality characteristics, one might conclude that trait theory is valid - that there are certain inherent predispositions that dictate or control our behavior

patterns. It must be noted, however, that correlation does not imply causation. The study of personality development must not only provide us with correlational findings, but also those which attempt to expose causation as well. In other words, in the above study was it the extraversion that caused the high levels of norepinephrine, or the high levels of norepinephrine which resulted in extraversion? Questions such as this must be answered in order to elucidate the biological mechanisms involved in the development of personality. Nevertheless, correlational findings can reveal interesting relationships between the physical and psychological realms.

The Trait Approach to Personality Assessment

The objective and accurate measurement of individual differences between individuals is the goal of trait assessment, or psychometrics. Two prominent tests, the MMPI and California F Scale, are currently being utilized for this purpose. The MMPI, or Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory, is a self-administered questionnaire that was developed empirically, through administration to different groups of patients characterized by certain psychiatric diagnoses (e.g. hysteria, schizophrenia) and to normal individuals, and each item was then checked for showing response patterns discriminating these groups (Cattel & Dreger, 1977). The California F Scale, also a self-report measure, attempts to determine whether or not an individual possesses the constellation of traits known as

authoritarianism. This disposition includes rigid adherence to regulations, antagonism to subjective phenomena, outward projection of emotional impulses, cynicism, and a certain orientation to power. The California F Scale has correlated conservative political views and lower education and socioeconomic status with the authoritarian disposition.

Another, but less popular self-report scale used for the assessment of individual traits is known as the SSS (Sensation Seeking Scale), as utilized in the Welch et al. (1987) study. This group of scales was designed to identify such individual traits as thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility.

There are a number of frequently heard objections to questionnaire-based tests such as the three discussed above. Probably the most notable is presented by Cuadra & Reed (1954) who argue that the scales are "structured, by which is meant that the test materials consist of conventional, culturally crystallized questions to which the subject must respond in one of a very few fixed ways" (p. 1). Put simply, questionnaire methods in personality assessment are said not to allow the person to present a diverse and unique way of expressing him/herself onto the test materials, as is possible with psychodynamic projective techniques.

The Phenomenological Approach

The two approaches in the study of personality that we have

discussed to this point stress the influence of the environment on the organism (social-learning theory) and, at the other extreme, inherent dispositions which interact with the environment (trait theory). Neitner one of these approaches, however, stresses the cognitive acquisition of meaning from the stimuli he or she is presented with in life's daily activities. The measurement of meaning people acquire from stimuli, as developed by C.E. Osgood (1957), is one approach to personality which recognizes the importance of cognitive functioning. Stimuli, according to Osgood, can best be explained in terms of "significants" (e.g., objects), and "signs" (e.g., representations of objects). Agreeing with the behavioral school-of-thought, Osgood asserts that all stimuli - as presented to an organism - frequently lead to some internal or external response. Indeed, Osgood's theory capitalizes on conditioning in this manner. However, in his theory Osgood emphasizes the importance of the psychological meaning of the significant. The meaning, according to Osgood, is simply that which, through a series of cognitive events, is an idea that has been conveyed to the individual's "mind".

Within the psychological definition of meaning, Osgood distinguishes between two specific types. Denotative meaning, as explained by Osgood, is simply the example of the stimuli itself. The denotative meaning can best be understood by using his example of thunder. Thunder is the significant or stimuli to

which the person will respond. The denotative meaning of thunder can be scientifically construed, or simply be defined as a loud "boom" that occurs during a storm. Connotative meaning, on the other hand, is the person's emotional reaction to the thunder. According to Osgood, people will probably agree on the denotative meaning, yet disagree on the connotative meaning. Most people will agree that thunder is a loud "boom" that occurs during a storm, but will probably differ in their emotional reaction to that "boom". What factors are involved that ultimately result in this difference? Osgood calls these factors "mediators", and through much research he and his colleagues concluded that there are three essential mediators in all signs and significants. This means that, according to Osgood, all meanings that people acquire from stimuli are based on the extent to which the stimuli elicit three mediators. These three mediators are as follow: evaluative (e.g., good-bad) mediator, potency (e.g., strong-weak, hard soft) mediator, and activity (e.g., active-passive) mediator.

As mentioned earlier, Osgood emphasizes the psychological meaning of the significant. It is important to mention at this point that there must be cognitive development in order for any significant (stimulus) to obtain meaning. The psychological meaning of any significant or sign is thus represented through this cognitive development in the form of it's association with the three mediators. This is the fundamental difference between

Osgood's theory and the mechanistic approaches to behavior. The latter do not stress or even recognize the importance of cognitive reactions and/or the mediators involved; while to Osgood, cognitive reactions are the precursors to behavior and ultimately, to the development of personality.

The Phenomenological Approach to Personality Assessment

After Osgood concluded that there are essentially three mediators involved in the development of meaning, he applied them to the multiple personality case of "Eve White", "Eve Black", and "Jane" (Osgood & Luria, 1957). Multiple personality, as described by Davison & Neale (1986), is a "rare dissociative disorder which is characterized by two or more distinctive personalities existing within the same individual... with only one of them dominant at any given time" (p. 60). By using his measurement of meaning, Osgood place each personality of Eve into what he referred to as a semantic space. The semantic space as described by Osgood is simply the three dimensions that show several significants as they appear in relation to the evaluative, potency, and activity mediators. Osgood rated each personality twice during therapy and concluded that the second assessment revealed shifts in the position of the significants in their semantic space. For example, the second assessment of Jane showed that, within her semantic space, her attitude toward her husband for the first time was meaningful. Also, Jane's semantic space initially revealed her to have an ego-dominated personality

that was superficially healthy; yet the second assessment suggested that she was adjusting satisfactorily to her roles of mother and wife.

An attempt to identify with her mother throughout life is suggested in the semantic space of Eve White, and although there were shifts of significants within the semantic space, it remained evident that she possessed unsatisfactory attitudes toward herself. As Osgood suggested, this was the result of associating herself with bad, passive, and weak mediators. The significant "me" remained located in the bad, passive, and weak dimensions in both assessments, and a large distinction between her meanings of both "love" and "sex" emerged.

Eve Black showed very little shift between the first and second analysis. "Hatred" and "fraud" occupied basically the same space as "father", "me", and "peace". This suggests that Eve Black perceived herself as good, yet it is interesting that she believed hatred and fraud to be just as good, strong, and active as she perceived herself. Osgood noted that Eve Black's way of perceiving the world consistently deviated from the norm, and that she attempted to identify with her father.

It is important to mention that these assessments were based on semantic differential data, not on statements made from clinicians. The measurement of meaning, as developed by Osgood, offers interesting data for conceptualizing and studying the meanings people acquire from stimuli (which can be considered a

form of cognitive functioning), however, it does not represent a framework for the development of personality.

The Cognitive-Developmental Approach

In order to trace the development of personality from birth to adulthood one must recognize the capacities and concerns of the individual as his/her thought processes develop. This is the aim of the cognitive-developmental approach, and Piaget's theory is perhaps the most recognized contribution this area of development. According to Jean Piaget, who emphasized stages of cognitive development, all normal individuals pass through the same sequential periods in the growth of their ability to gain knowledge and awareness of themselves and their environment.

Piaget asserted that the thought of infants and children is not a miniature version of adult thought. It is qualitatively unique. Thus when children comment that the sun follows them when they go for a walk, they are not being illogical; instead, children are operating from a different mental framework or set of rules for interpreting the world (Vander Zanden, 1987). Piaget calls this mental framework a scheme. A scheme, according to Piaget, is a cognitive structure that an individual evolves for dealing with specific situations in the environment.

To Piaget, new experiences interact with the individual's existing cognitive structure (scheme) and alter the structure, thereby making it more adequate. This modified structure in turn influences all of the person's subsequent perceptions, thus

creating a process by which experience modifies scheme and scheme modifies experience.

Piaget believed that the critical question in the study of development is how the child adjusts to the environment. Assimilation, a Piagetian term, essentially means "interpreting or construing external objects and events in terms of one's own presently available and favored way of thinking about things" (Flavell, 1977, p. 7). The young child who pretends that a piece of rope is a snake is, in Piaget's terms, assimilating the piece of rope to his concept of snake. This assimilation is continuously balanced by what Piaget referred to as accommodation. A child adapts to the language requirements of the environment through this process, as Pulaski (1980) describes:

> The listening child begins to babble in response to conversation around him and gradually approximates the words he is assimilating. "Daddy" comes out "dada" and "flower" may be "fwodder", but as the child continues his efforts, he accommodates the sounds he makes to those he hears, and his baby talk becomes understandable speech. (in Understanding Piaget, p. 10)

Piaget's assimilation-accommodation model provides a valuable general conception of how man's cognitive system might interact with the environment. It is also, according to Flavell (1977), a useful vehicle for thinking about cognitive

development, that is, about how the child's cognitive system might gradually evolve with maturation and experience.

As mentioned earlier, Piaget conceived of a stage theory of cognitive development. Since Piaget argued that full personality does not emerge until adolescence (Pulaski, 1980), we will only briefly summarize the four stages as they appear below:

> Sensorimotor - (birth to 2 years) Child lacks language and does not use symbols, or mental representation of objects in environment. Child learns to seek hidden objects (object permanence) and begins to acquire basics of language.
>
> Preoperational - (2 to 7 years) Child begins to represent world mentally, but thought is egocentric. Child does not focus on two aspects at once (lack of conservation). Child shows animism, artificialism, imminent justice.
>
> Concrete Operational - (7 to 12 years) Child shows conservation concepts, can adopt viewpoint of others, can classify objects in series, and shows comprehension of basic relational concepts (such as one object being larger or heavier than another).
>
> Formal Operational - (12 years and above) Mature, adult thought emerges. Thinking seems characterized by deductive logic, consideration of various possibilities before attempting to solve a problem (mental trial-and-error), abstract thought, and forming and testing of hypotheses. (Rathus, 1981, p. 386)

The above stages represent Piaget's conception of intellectual development. One might wonder about the relevance of these stages to the development of personality. These stages do not purport to explain the development or construct of personality. In order to illustrate how cognitive functioning influences the development of personality, one must consider the cognitive processes involved in socialization. This type of approach (Gleitman, 1981) "emphasizes the role of understanding

in the development of interpersonal conduct and morality...as mental development unfolds, so does rational comprehension of how one does (and should) relate to others" (pp. 502-503).

One cognitive theorist, Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), presents three levels of morality which go beyond Piaget's theorizing in this area and can help us to understand the development of personality. According to Kohlberg, the "preconventional level" is a stage during which morality is based on expectations of rewards and punishments rather than adherence to social rules or conventions. Kohlberg's second level stresses moral judgements as shaped from the adherence of the individual to social conventions. This second level of moral development is termed the "conventional level". The third and final level of moral development, the "postconventional level", is Kohlberg's explanation of how moral judgements are derived from abstract moral principles. At this level, Kohlberg argues that people will sometimes find it necessary to oppose laws and rules that they consider unjust, even at the risk of great personal sacrifice. This last level seems to contradict strict behavioral theory, which argues that people will behave only in such a way that is beneficial to themselves.

It is apparent upon consideration of Kohlberg's levels of morality that personality, as Kohlberg views it, can be influenced by the level at which an individual is functioning at any given time. To Kohlberg, arrival at each of these is

dependent upon age, yet he also argues that many people never mature beyond the conventional level. Is it possible that someone who is "stuck" at the conventional level would never, for example, risk his or her own life in an effort to save that of another? According to Kohlberg, it is possible. This type of behavior would not be compatible with the level of morality at which the individual is functioning; or, according to the definition of personality, would not fit the person's consistent behavior patterns - it would be dissonant.

Other types of dissonance constructs as they relate to personality have been introduced by cognitive-oriented theorists. Perhaps receiving the most attention is Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Festinger defined dissonance in structural terms as when the opposite of one concept follows from the other. The words "follows from" here may be defined as the degree to which a given combination of characteristics is usual in the person's experience and expected in his or her imagination. The magnitude of this dissonance depends on the ratio of dissonant concepts to the total number of concepts, both consonant and dissonant, maintained by the individual. An example of this is a person who smokes cigarettes and in turn develops rationalizations for doing so (e.g., "It relaxes me"). Knowing that cigarette smoking is dangerous to one's health is dissonant with the act of smoking. This dissonance develops into discomfort with one's own action, thereby developing into

compensatory forms of actions, such as the aforementioned rationalization.

The above theory of cognitive dissonance is referred to as a "construct approach" to how an individual interprets his or her environment. Attribution theory, another construct approach, deals with the processes by which we impute causes to behavior - our interpretations of the behavior of others (Aronson, 1984). When an event occurs, there is a tendency among individuals to try to attribute a cause to that event. For example, if a person acts in a deviant way, observers of the action will make inferences regarding what caused the action. According to a study by Nichols (1975), this phenomenon can even occur in a self-attributions form. He found that fourth grade boys attribute their own successes in intellectual tasks to ability, while fourth-grade girls tend to derogate their own intellectual performance. Moreover, he found that, while boys attributed their own failures to bad luck, girls took more of the blame for failures on themselves.

It should be evident to the reader by now that the cognitive approach to personality development stresses internalized thought processes such as cognitive interpretation of events in the environment. The many cognitive explanations of how an individual interprets his or her surroundings can, in a sense, be taken as a collection of theories geared toward an understanding of personality.

The Cognitive Approach to Personality Assessment

Personality assessment from a cognitive approach can take its form in attitudinal and thoughts questionnaires, however, it seems as though cognitive forms of personality assessment are less developed than the behavioral, trait, or phenomenological methods. This is probably due in part to the highly theoretical nature of the cognitive approach and the fact that cognitive theory is a relatively newer approach. While cognitive neuroscientists have developed non-intrusive tests which determine an individual's abilities to process information and neurophysiologists are currently investigating brain wave patterns of individuals under various controlled conditions, much more work is needed in the area of cognitive functioning as it relates to personality. There are a few cognitive-oriented tests, such as the ATQ (Hollon & Kendall, 1980), which can be related to personality constructs. The ATQ, or Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire, is a 30-item self-report measure that covers different aspects of expectations that individual have about the future. This test has proven useful in measuring the occurrence of negative thought patterns in individuals, thus being a valuable tool for therapists, who, if cognitive-oriented, would concentrate on helping their clients to reduce their negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones.

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